

HER MAJESTY'S ONCE AGAIN

By GERALD MORICE

So Her Majesty's Theatre is once more to be the name of the playhouse in London's Haymarket, opposite the Theatre Royal. What a quantity of theatrical history has been associated with the site at the corner of the Haymarket and Pall Mall in the almost 250 years since, in 1705, the Queen's Theatre was opened! The architect was Sir John Vanbrugh, playwright and builder of Blenheim, and also one of the first directors of the new playhouse, which had been planned and erected in consequence of a quarrel between the management and players of Drury Lane.

The Queen's, later to be known as the King's, soon became the home of opera. Here, in 1711, Handel's first opera, "Rinaldo," was given; here too the same great composer's "Esther," the first oratorio to be heard in this country, was sung. Mozart's music was first introduced to London audiences at the Kings, when his opera, "La Clemenza di Tito," was staged in 1806. Prague had heard it, though, in 1791, and the same city had seen the first production of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" four years previously, in 1787, while London waited till 1817.

The next year was marked by the first performance in England of Rossini's "Barbiere," his first opera to be given here. In 1818, also, the auditorium of the theatre, which had been burned down in 1789 and rebuilt in 1791, was remodelled by John Nash. Two years later colonnades were added round the three sides of the site, King Charles-street, Haymarket and Pall Mall, and at the back the Royal Opera Arcade, which still exists, was built. On the accession of Queen Victoria the theatre was called Her Majesty's. The building was again burned down, in 1867; in 1869 it was reconstructed. In 1892 it was demolished, but in 1897 Herbert Beerbohm Tree opened his "beautiful theatre," as he called it, as Her Majesty's. But it only occupied part of the ground used by previous buildings. On the rest rose the Carlton Hotel.

If the King's Theatre in the Haymarket was particularly noted in the eighteenth century for its operatic productions, so in the first half of the nineteenth century, though great singers appeared there, its chief renown was for its ballets. They had "balletomanes" then. The enthusiasm reached its culmination when in 1845 the four greatest dancers of the day, Taglioni, Carlotta Grisi, Cerito and Lucille Grahn, all appeared in the "Pas de Quatre." This involved immense preparations and outlay by the manager, Lumley: a special cross-channel boat was chartered with a private train at Dover to bring one of the ballerinas to London.

Then, in 1847, there was a further sensation—the first appearance in England of the "Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lind. Lumley was still manager and he had to struggle with Covent Garden and

Drury Lane for the privilege of presenting her.

The cost of maintaining large opera and ballet ensembles was such that managers almost invariably went bankrupt at the Italian Opera House. Indeed one of them contrived to run the place while a prisoner for debt. Asked how he was able to carry on under the circumstances, he stated that at least between bars he was not being constantly pestered by performers and others with all their varied demands and desires. But that was in the first decade of the nineteenth century, when things were very different!

In the second half of the nineteenth century matters do not seem to have gone so well for the theatre. There was the operatic competition of Covent Garden to be reckoned with. Managers came and went. In 1860 the amazing E. T. Smith, at one time or another in charge of the majority of London's theatres, as also Cremorne Gardens, produced the first pantomime, "Tom Thumb," to be staged at Her Majesty's. In 1889 there was even a boxing contest. On another occasion what must have been the longest and strangest first night took place there. This was in 1866 and the play was "Oonagh, or the Lovers of Lisnamona," based on a story by Miss Edgeworth. At 2 a.m. the end had not been reached, but the stage staff's patience was exhausted. They rang down the curtain and went home.

The theatre has been a fashionable place of entertainment for generation after generation, periods of twilight alternating with spells of glory, under Tree and those who have followed him right up to the present day. Yet not so long ago there was a threat that the final chapter would be reached. Let us hope that Her Majesty's may long survive!